

Determination and the rocket boys essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Homer H. Hickman, Jr. 's *Rocket Boys* (1998) is a beautiful exposition of determination on the part of a young person. Most definitely a crowd pleaser, the book is about growing up in a dismal coal mining town in West Virginia, and most importantly, about learning to build and fly rockets. " Like everybody else in Coalwood, I lived according to the rhythms set by the shifts," writes Homer Hickman, a young boy who does not show much spiritedness toward anything other than rocket science in the book.

Nobody thinks that the young individual is special in any way until he finally makes it, that is, the rocket. The boy is dreaming about becoming a rocket scientist despite the fact that his mathematical skills are poor. His determination to do something to fulfill his dream is so great that all of his neurological processes seem to be related to this singular dream. Homer finds it difficult to concentrate on other things, seeing that his grades in school are not spectacular by any means. However, a new world of understanding opens up for him when he begins to actually pursue his dream.

Homer writes: Until I began to build and launch rockets, I didn't know my hometown was at war with itself over its children and that my parents were locked in a kind of bloodless combat over how my brother and I would live our lives. I didn't know that if a girl broke your heart, another girl, virtuous at least in spirit, could mend it on the same night. And I didn't know that the enthalpy decrease in a converging passage could be transformed into jet kinetic energy if a divergent passage was added. The other boys discovered their own truths when we built our rockets, but those were mine.

Homer began to understand the world around him, including his societal structure and family values, only when he began the process of building and launching his rockets. The intensity of his desire to build and launch rockets was, in fact, the reason for his intellectual growth that followed his pursue of the dream. The reader is led to believe that Homer was perhaps unconscious until the time he began to build and launch rockets. The definition of “dreaming,” too, leads us to the same conclusion – that, in fact, Homer grew in awareness by leaps and bounds only when he began to do what he was born to do.

Before this time, nothing really made sense to the young individual. Homer must have also showed disinterest in his surroundings because the people making up his environment did not believe in his dream. In October 1958, when the world woke up to the amazing news that the Russians had put a satellite into space, Sputnik flied by at night for the first time. The entire town of Coalwood gathered to watch the unique event. It was a magical moment, and especially so for Homer, who describes it with magical art in his description of the event.

In fact, his writing inspires in his reader, too, the excitement that is due an event of such an extraordinary nature. And yet, the whole town seemed to have forgotten about it soon after. Except Homer, of course, who uses the event of the Sputnik as an inspiration in his youth. According to his book, the town of Coalwood had only coalmining on its mind. He writes: Coalwood, West Virginia, where I grew up, was built for the purpose of extracting the millions of tons of rich bituminous coal that lay beneath it.

In 1957, when I was fourteen years old and first began to build my rockets, there were nearly two thousand people living in Coalwood. My father, Homer Hickam, was the mine superintendent, and our house was situated just a few hundred yards from the mine's entrance, a vertical shaft eight hundred feet deep. Homer's townsfolk were only expected to believe in the profession of coalmining. And the fact that nobody believed that Homer was extraordinary in any way leads us to imagine that he did not care to share his dream with the rest, until, of course, he was ready to pursue it with all his energy.

Hence, Homer did not give much attention to his surroundings, just as his townsfolk refused to reflect on the subject of building and launching rockets. The indifference shown on the part of Homer with respect to knowledge about his environment; and the indifference shown on the part of Homer's townsfolk on the subject of building and launching rockets, is as though, reciprocal. It is as if the writer is saying: ' I do not really care about what you are made up of, seeing that you do not really care about my dream! ' All the same, Homer is proud of his roots in the coalmining town. He writes: " I was proud to live in Coalwood.

According to the West Virginia history books, no one had ever lived in the valleys and hills of McDowell County before we came to dig out the coal. " Homer's book is, no doubt, very beautifully written. It is an adventure in rocket science, beginning with a boy who dares to dream despite his people's sheer indifference regarding the subject. It is also a motivation for the rest of us to pursue our dreams, which may or may not be as exciting in reality as Homer's dream. In the process of building his first rocket, Homer blows up his mother's fence, unsurprisingly getting into trouble as a result.

The writer's mother is described with a next to perfect description, in the act of nurturing her surroundings thus: My mother, having a larger yard than most to work with, planted a rose garden. She hauled in dirt from the mountains by the sackful, slung over her shoulder, and fertilized, watered, and manicured each bush with exceeding care. The writer tells us that he accidentally blew up his mother's fence in the process of building his first rocket, after describing his mother's care for her surroundings. It is easy to imagine, therefore, the kind of trouble he must have dealt with.

The book is a "natural" exposition of the facts related to the author's life given that it does not make either short or long claims about anything under the bright blue sky. Perhaps the book would have occurred to the reader as an "unnatural" story if Homer's real experiences were not related in it. To put it another way, it is simple for the reader to imagine the kind of determination the young individual has nurtured in the process of his dream fulfillment. Despite all odds, including the trouble that he must go through in the process of following his dream, Homer would not stop pursuing the dream.

Homer was the kind to invent things and to take the initiative. Describing a game he played before he went on to form a group of young people who would join him in building and launching the rocket, he writes: Once, when I was eight years old, I found a stone arrowhead embedded in the stump of an ancient oak tree up on the mountain behind my house. My mother said a deer must have been lucky some long-ago day. I was so inspired by my find that I invented an Indian tribe, the Coalhicans, and convinced the boys I played with – Roy Lee, O'Dell, Tony, and Sherman – that it had really existed.

The fact that Homer invented the Indian tribe and convinced the boys that he played with that it really existed, tells us something unique about scientists in general: they must have the spirit of innovation imbedded deep in their souls. They must also be able to convince people about the importance of their inventions, just as Homer did, through trial and error. Homer's practice of taking the initiative, and his skill at persuasion allowed him to eventually catch the attention of his friends, who joined him in making the next rocket.

Homer also allowed the class nerd into his young rocket scientists' group, in spite of the fact that the rest of his group members were opposed to the idea. The determination of Homer to bring in the whiz at math and science into the group is actually his determination to build the rocket at all costs. The boy was not willing to give up by any means! If, in the process of the letting the class nerd join the group, Homer would have lost the rest of the group members, the reader would expect the young individual to recruit more helpers in the cause.

The group that Homer formed with the boys for rocket science, was called the Big Creek Missile Agency, or BCMA, in imitation of Wernher Von Braun's ABMA. Soon, the boys were in a greater mess, seeing that one of their rockets slammed into the side of the office occupied by the mine's supervisor – Homer's dad. The boy describes his dad as a thorough professional: In 1934, when he was twenty-two years old, my father applied for work as a common miner with Mr. Carter's company. He came because he had heard that a man could make a good life for himself in Coalwood.

Almost immediately, the Captain saw something in the skinny, hungry lad from Gary – some spark of raw intelligence, perhaps – and took him as a protege. After a couple of years, the Captain raised Dad to section foreman, taught him how to lead men and operate and ventilate a mine, and instilled in him a vision of the town. Just like his mother, the father of Homer was not expected to show great tolerance in the situation. However, like Homer’s mother, the father of the young individual was expected to eventually grasp that his son was up to something very important and wonderful.

The fact that Homer eventually became a NASA scientist must have made his father proud. Homer and friends, the rocket boys, are later blamed for starting a forest fire with their rocket. As a result of this situation, the police had to march into their school and take the rocket boys away in handcuffs. By no means did this situation lead Homer to give up his dream, however. Seeing his enthusiasm and determination, eventually the whole town joins him as helpers in the cause. People stepped forward to help him in doing welds, in supplying materials, and in giving technical advice.

Once again, this seemingly strange unfolding of the situation is not “unnatural.” This is because the reader, too, is led to believe in Homer’s vision by this point in the book, and to want to help him succeed in building and launching rockets. Homer does, indeed, intend to make a difference in the world through his rocket science, and the determination and enthusiasm he reveals are contagious. The book is an expression of exhilaration, and the reader may even imagine that the whole world is celebrating rocket science along with the young scientist from Coalwood, experiencing one Eureka moment after another!

Homer is not just a great scientist, but also an extremely good writer. His art of writing is remarkable, seeing as his descriptions could very conveniently lead the reader into young Homer's life, building and launching rockets. The novel is an adventure in discovery, and may very well lead many a young person to pursue his scientific goals. Best of all, the book is not science fiction, and therefore turns Homer into a genuine model for tomorrow's scientists.